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Seeing Through Transparency in Education Reform: Illuminating the “Local”

Jill Koyama

University of Arizona



Brian Kania

State University of New York (SUNY) at Buffalo
United States

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Abstract: Utilizing “assemblage,” a notion associated with Actor-Network Theory (ANT), we explore what discourses of transparency can, and cannot, accomplish in a network of education reform that includes schools, government agencies, and community organizations. Drawing on data collected between July 2011 and March 2013 in an ethnographically-informed case study, we interrogate the ways in which notions of transparency illuminate, and also conceal, information, as well as reveal how they reorder power dynamics and relationships, impacting what it legitimized as reform in a city in Western New York. We problematize the linkages between the political conditions in which mandatory transparency and accountability in schooling become connected to voluntary transparency in local education reform, and we examine the investment made by schools and reform organizations in using transparency as a proxy for meeting accountability demands and establishing education expertise. The findings show that discourses and enactments of transparency can be effective in drawing targeted and

repeated attention to select things, such as funding inequities. However, such discourses can also be utilized to obscure other issues, such as persistent disparities in academic achievement by race. When used synonymously with accountability, transparency can, and is, incorrectly positioned as an education solution.

Keywords: transparency, networks, politics, reform

Viendo a través de la transparencia las reformas educativas: Iluminando lo “local”

Resumen: Utilizando la noción de “ensamblaje”, una idea asociada con la teoría de actores-red (ANT), exploramos lo que los discursos sobre la transparencia pueden, y no pueden, lograr en una red de reformas educativa que incluyen escuelas, agencias gubernamentales y organizaciones comunitarias. Sobre la base de datos recogidos entre julio de 2011 y marzo de 2013, en un estudio de casos etnográficos, interroguamos las formas en que las nociones de transparencia iluminan, y también ocultan, la información, así como revelan cómo se reordenan las dinámicas de poder y relaciones, impactando lo que se legitima como reforma en una ciudad en el oeste de Nueva York. Problematizamos los vínculos entre condicionamientos políticos que hacen que modelos de transparencia y rendición de cuentas obligatorios se conecten con modelos de transparencia voluntaria en reformas educativas locales. También examinamos las inversiones realizadas por las escuelas y las organizaciones de reforma en el uso de transparencia como un proxy para satisfacer las demandas de rendición de cuentas y el establecimiento de competencia educativa. Los resultados muestran que los discursos y las representaciones sobre transparencia pueden ser eficaces en focalizar la atención específicamente y repetidamente para seleccionar factores, tales como desigualdades de financiamiento. Sin embargo, este tipo de discursos se pueden utilizar también para ocultar otros problemas, tales como las disparidades persistentes en logros académicos por raza. La transparencia cuando se usa como sinónimo de rendición de cuentas, puede ser y es, colocada incorrectamente como una solución a los problemas educativos.

Palabras clave: transparencia; redes; política; reforma

Vendo através de transparéncia reformas educacionais: Iluminando o “local”

Resumo: Usando a noção de “montagem”, uma idéia associada com a teoria do ator-rede (ANT), nós exploramos o que os discursos sobre a transparéncia podem e não podem realizar em uma rede de reformas educacionais que incluem escolas, agências organizações governamentais e comunitárias. Com base em dados coletados entre julho de 2011 e março de 2013, em um estudo de casos etnográficamente, estamos interrogando as formas que iluminam os conceitos de transparéncia e também esconder a informação, e revelam como dinâmica reordenadas poder e relações, impactando o que é legitimada como a reforma em uma cidade em New York ocidental. Nós problematizar as relações entre as condições políticas que tornam os modelos de transparéncia e prestação de contas de contas obrigatórias para se conectar com os modelos de transparéncia voluntária em reformas educacionais locais. Também examinamos os investimentos feitos por escolas e organizações de reforma no uso de transparéncia como um proxy para atender às exigências de prestação de contas e o estabelecimento de uma concorrência educacional. Os resultados mostram que os discursos e representações sobre a transparéncia pode ser eficaz na focalização da atenção específica e repetidamente para selecionar fatores, tais como as desigualdades de financiamento. No entanto, esses discursos também pode ser usado para esconder outros problemas, tais como as disparidades persistentes no

desempenho escolar por corrida. Transparéncia quando usado como sinônimo de prestação de contas, pode ser e está posicionado incorretamente como uma solução para os problemas educacionais.

Palavras-chave: transparéncia; redes; política; reforma

Introduction

Contemporary education reform in the United States and abroad encompasses multifaceted attempts at situating, enacting, supporting, ignoring, subverting, and disrupting policy. It is often portrayed as an iteration of conservative values, with emphasis on choice, accountability, and privatization; however, complex networks of elected officials, think tanks, organizations, and foundations—with both conservative and progressive leanings—actually drive much reform. These new networks of change include “interdependent social relations—ranging from simple dyadic interactions to complex social divisions of labour” (Jessop, 2002, p.52)—in which policy advocacy work and local reform are situated with(in) and alongside traditional education and governance structures. In this “heterarchical governance” (Jessop, 2002), policy actors and organizations are not necessarily ranked, but rather new modalities and spatial assemblages between policy actors, organizations, and contexts emerge in patterns that can parallel, traverse, contain, or be subsumed by ranked orderings. This has become particularly evident in the U.S. Department of Education’s deployment of linked policy, innovative competitive grant programs, and large-scale data production and tracking, which are geared toward performance outputs and accountability, and which facilitate a multiplicity of public-private collaborations.

Central to these networks of reform is the notion of “transparency.”¹ In particular, the U.S. government, as an official policymaking body, harnesses the allure of transparency, as part of a broader discourse of choice and public participation, to reap support for federal education policy, initiatives, and programs. In what Fox (2007) describes as “proactive dissemination,” the government makes certain information about its policy and programs available to the public, who are invited to provide input on the government reforms via limited open meetings and online communications. In turn, the policy and programs hold states, districts, schools, and individuals accountable to their practices by making the mandates for these practices transparent. Simultaneously, those situating themselves as “local” education activists, advocates, and reformers claim transparency as one of their key assets; they voluntarily provide certain kinds of information about their organizations and work to meet the public’s zeal for evidence and data. Devices of transparency, used by official policy makers and activists, however, both illuminate and selectively partition visibility to obscure and conceal (Koyama & Kania, 2014; Strathern, 2000). Transparency is utilized by government entities, schools, and other organizations in education reform networks as an important political apparatus (Barry, 2006), controlling what is and is not shared, in what format and frequency, and by what authority.

Here, we ask: What does the discourse on transparency in education reform accomplish, and for whom? Specifically, we explore: In what ways are notions of transparency developed and enacted in one city’s local education reform, and what do they accomplish? Utilizing “assemblage,” a notion associated with Actor-Network Theory (ANT), we trace how various practices and performances of transparency are distributed across a network of education reform that includes schools, government agencies, and community reform organizations and individuals. Drawing on data collected between July 2011 and March 2013, we present a case study of a local education reform network that

¹ On first use, words that invite controversy, and which we define or challenge, are italicized.

emerged in a city in Western New York (WNY), which we refer to as “Wayside.” We interrogate the ways in which concepts of transparency illuminate, and also conceal, information; our study reveals how they reorder power dynamics and relationships, impacting what it legitimized as education reform and diverting attention away from arguably more important issues in teaching and learning. We provide examples in which mandatory transparency and accountability in schooling and voluntary transparency in local education reform, are, themselves, rendered as solutions to pernicious schooling issues in Wayside, including within district racial segregation, low graduation rates, and high numbers of out of school detentions. We examine the investment made by schools and reform organization in using transparency as a representation for meeting accountability demands and establishing expertise in education.

Our interest in, and focus on, the use of transparency across an education reform network emerged from our initial aim to determine if local education reform in Wayside was actually local. Our early findings revealed that within the education reform network studied, actors made visible their WNY connections while concealing their linkages to state and national organizations that often conflicted with their local branding and their stated political orientations. They garnered endorsements and funding for their work by publically amplifying their city and regional associations, while obscuring, if not hiding, their linkages to New York City politics (which were often seen negatively by Waysiders) and national political organizations. However, as we demonstrate in this article, much of the reform was in fact, influenced, if not driven, by agendas, funding, and motivations originating outside of Wayside that, ironically, were hidden by clever uses of transparency and calls for local action.

Informed by the ways in which study participants operationally defined key terms, we refer to a “reformer” as one who actively works to change an aspect of society—in this study, education—and who is a member in a collective (organization, agency, group) that works for this change. An “activist,” is one who uses direct, often confrontational action to oppose or support a cause, with the intention of changing political or social policy or processes. Again, here we are referring to education processes and policy. Broadly, “community,” in this study, refers to a group of individuals who join together to achieve a shared goal. While many in the community share similar values, they do not necessarily agree on how to act, but aim for consensus. Members of the community may or may not reside within a shared geographic location; they may be connected only through online relationships. Conversely, we use “local” to refer to the Western New York (WNY) region.

The WNY Context and Policy

In the last two decades, at the federal level, and increasingly at the state level, significant shifts have occurred in how education policy is framed and in how solutions are constructed (McGuinn, 2012). The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), the 2002 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), served as the overarching federal legislation guiding the country’s public education throughout our study. While other policies, such as Race to the Top (RTT) and Investing in Innovation (I3), were intertwined with NCLB—particularly in their managerial emphasis on free-market structure, increased accountability, heightened efficiency, and open choice—they also signaled a shift in social policy to emerging discourses of social entrepreneurship, innovation, and information-based policy production, deployment, and evaluation.

Through smaller-scale initiatives such as Digital Promise and Pay for Success, and the creation of a new Federal Office of Social Innovation and Civic Participation, the Obama Administration has recalibrated the boundaries between social welfare, the public good, and

entrepreneurial culture by creating a narrative cohesion between these new modalities and spatial arrangements of policy actors and commitments to re-energize civic engagement and participation. The Administration's new initiatives, centered on evidence and innovation, posit bottom-up civic engagement in policy—from citizens, universities, foundations, and entrepreneurs—alongside rigorous evaluation and accountability schemes of what works (Deese, 2014). These policies are not coherent strategies, but sets of trends (Ball, 2008), that emerge to proactively manage what policy makers see as macro-level shifts in economic cycles, including new forms of fluid borderless capital, global policy convergences, and economic competitiveness. Innovation has been embedded within education reform through public education's increasing ties to economic development and capital investment.

New York State (NY), and specifically our geographic area of interest, Western New York (WNY), typify geographic areas where education reformers—most of whom claim to be local—are tightly connected to these narratives of federal reform. During the study (and prior to it, starting in 2009), alongside, and within, traditional policy channels, a great deal of what can be positioned as education reform began to blur the lines between the private and the public in the state and region. NY has one of the most prolific and active private contracting fields in the U.S., covering testing, data management, and charter schools (DiMartino & Scott, 2012), as well as an enormously extensive and well-connected reform community. The rise in reformer networks and private contracting coincided with the state securing a second round of Race to the Top (RTT) funding (\$700 million) in 2010. As McGuinn (2012) argues, the instantiation of reform discourses through competitive grants like RTT provided much needed political cover for the “tough political choices” that the reformers demanded at the state and local levels around such issues as Common Core Learning Standards, teacher evaluation systems, data-driven instruction and, most importantly, the power of teachers’ unions.

The adoption of RTT, the NCLB flexibility waiver, and the reform agenda set forth by the governing NY Board of Regents created an active reform environment which generated, “as discourses do, subject positions, social relations and opportunities within policies [that produced] new kinds of actors, social interactions and institutions” (Ball, 2007, p. 2). Reform assemblages, as Ball (2010) notes, “involve processes of consensus building” (p. 155) and in NY this happened primarily through a *bricolage* of networked discourses, language, strategies, and affiliations. Connections in these emerging reform assemblages slid between statewide and national reform groups, parent organizations, civil rights groups, politicians, business leaders, and state agencies.

The Governor of NY, Andrew Cuomo, who began his administration with an aggressive education reform agenda, allocated monies to performance-based grants, championed teacher evaluation systems, and formed a NY Educational Reform Commission composed primarily from business, technology and new sector education agencies. Individuals with ties to the Commission moved across multiple state and national networks. For example, one of the state’s official representatives on the Reform Commission, who worked for the national organization Democrats for Education Reform, returned to WNY to form Wayside Ed Reform, an organization designed to help foster the goals of RTT. Identified by the Governor as a “rising star” two years later, she was appointed to a high-ranking position in New York’s Department of Education (NYDOE) in 2011. Governor Cuomo also recently appointed the leader of Wayside Parent Coalition to a state level commission on common core curriculum. John King, former head of Uncommon Schools in NYC, became NY Secretary of Education in 2011. During the writing of this article, John King left this position and was named, in January 2015, as the Senior Advisor Delegated Duties of Deputy Secretary of Education, by President Obama. He has since become the U.S. Secretary of Education.

Accountability and Transparency

Much work (Au, 2010; Hursh, 2007; Koyama, 2013; Scott, Jabbar, LaLonde, DeBray, & Lubienski, 2015) has demonstrated that contemporary education policy and reform are part and parcel of a neoliberal movement that has infiltrated public education with increased efficiency objectives, achievement standards, funding competitions, and multilevel accountability. Schooling is not only in the service of the market, but actually becomes a state-sanctioned and supported competitive marketplace. A cornerstone of this competitive marketplace rests on increasing efficiency and improving decision-making through the increased generation, management, and utilization of quantitative school data (Hursh, 2007; Koyama & Kania, 2014). Contemporary education policy is characterized by the generation, manipulation, and publication of information in the form of numbers, quantitative data, statistics, and comparisons (Ozga, 2009).

The quantified information is presented as “evidence” in an explicit strategy to increase the effectiveness of education and as a way to make “reliable” school data available to the public. The reliance on quantitative measurement is what Lingard (2011) positions as “policy of/as numbers,” in which numbers, including statistical comparisons at the school, district, state, national, and international levels, serve as technologies of governance or accountability. As stated by Fenwick and Edwards (2010): “In efforts to ensure that standards are achieved, practices are accounted for, made both calculable and representable,” much effort and massive resources have been put into developing processes and agencies to hold education to account (p. 114). The quantification of education is a particular form of governance in the “audit society” (Power, 1997) or “audit culture” (Shore & Wright, 1999) that lends itself to devices of transparency to convey compliance.

Transparency is evoked to defend “[t]echniques for assessing, auditing and evaluating institutions” (Strathern, 2000, p. 309); however, this seems at odds with the empirical studies of market-driven education reform. Au and Ferrare (2014), in their study of the Yes On 1240, trace the networks of wealthy foundations and individuals who lent material and symbolical aid to local, grassroots non-profits, advocacy groups, and a pro-charter research center. Their efforts were revealed as part of a carefully orchestrated policy and media campaign to adopt a charter school initiative in Washington State. Because discourses and evidence around accountability were produced and disseminated through local advocates and tethered to a desire to “do right by low-income children” both the local advocacy groups and the wealthy supporters appear to be part of locally constructed, grassroots endeavor, obfuscating the role of powerful and distant foundations and individuals. We found similar shifting and dissembling networks of education reform in our study.

So too did Scott and Jabbar (2014) expose the complex ways that foundations empowered intermediary organizations (IOs) to work with local reform oriented organizations to build grassroots support for accountability and privatization, to occupy traditional political channels in lobbying efforts, and to disseminate and produce research aligned with the goals of foundations. These dense reform networks situated within Denver, New York City, and New Orleans, have policy actors who shift between multiple organizations and state positions in what Scott and Jabbar call a “tight cohesion between policy makers, funders and IOs” (p. 253). The production and dissemination of research and evidence by IOs are often tied to a foundation’s ideological goals, thus calling into question the real transparency and efficacy of evidence gathered for market-oriented and incentivized reform, and also its accountability to public scrutiny.

According to Hill (2006), transparency is merely part of “the current neoliberal project” in which “intensive testing...and accountability schemes are aimed at restoring schools” (p.1) to function effectively in reproducing the very social stratifications that federal education policy, such

as No Child Left Behind, are said to reduce. It also aims to change the public's response to government and business—and now, education processes that were once more securely in the domain of those working in schools. Lipman (2011), Lipman and Haines (2007), and Means (2008) who study Chicago's Renaissance 2010, note that privatization and market-oriented reforms of schooling need to be situated alongside of urban political economy and gentrification. They argue that Chicago's push toward accountability regimes, privatization and "get tough" strategies on failing schools—including the closure of a disproportionate amount of schools that served predominately low-income and minority students—was to reframe Chicago as a globally-oriented city of capital accumulation and international business. This re-mapping of urban space around powerful class interests and privatization, involved the gentrification of poor neighborhoods and the closing of schools within potential zones of re-investment. These plans, organized by powerful business and political interests, undercut democratic accountability by positioning accountability and transparency as apolitical and neutral tools of school reform.

In a similar fashion, post-Katrina New Orleans has become a hotbed for national, regional and local reformers to test accountability and privatization of public schooling on a large scale (Henry, 2016; Jabbar, 2015). Notwithstanding the trumpeting of reformers that New Orleans has been an unqualified success, Jabbar closely examines the state of the new reforms in context of New Orleans' inescapable history and local contexts. Despite the fact that market-oriented reforms are often thought to be class and race neutral and in the best interests of all students—particularly minority students—Jabbar argues markets "create new politics, a politics that, in this case, denies political motivations: the politics of no politics" (2015, p. 767). In her estimation, these reforms are situated in local histories shaped by racism and economic disenfranchisement and contestation over these reforms and democratic decision-making still continues.

Likewise, in a multi-year ethnographic study of No Child Left Behind, Koyama and Kania (2014) show that transparency can do more to legitimize the political action of those who promote transparency in education than it does to reform schooling. In that study, politicians, state education officers, city officials, school district, education leaders, and the media were found to use the transparency of numbers and quantified accounts of academic achievement to draw attention away from the ways in which NCLB negatively impacts poor, Black, and Latino youth. As Strathern (2000) argues, making something visible can also purposefully conceal something else. Transparency, having the ability to both reveal and hide, is doubled-edged.

At first glance, making education data, especially schooling data, public, or at least publicly accessible seems crucial for evoking public concern and understanding. In fact, transparency reconfigures relationships between information, those people and institutions who ready it for public consumption, and the audience for who it is made visible (Power, 1997). However, transparency illuminates only selected information, providing an increasingly narrow account of education centered on what is measured and shared. Transparency is thus implicated as part of the construction of a variety of actors, devices, and organizations capable of generating, monitoring, maintaining, and circulating education data. Further, transparency represents not only the processes of monitoring and auditing, but also sets of practices, methods, and instruments aimed at producing particular kinds of information tailored for specific audiences (Barry, 2002)—which also become involved in sharing the information. In their examination of like-school comparisons in New York and Australia, Gorur and Koyama (2013) demonstrate how simplified quantitative accounts of education data, which are created for public consumption, are not accepted at face value, but are rather re-disseminated, challenged, and disrupted by the public.

Discourses across Assemblages

The notion of assemblage we utilize emerges from actor-network theory (ANT) (see Latour, 2005), which can best be understood as a related set of material-semiotic frameworks, rather than a singular theory. ANT perspectives focus on how disparate human actors, their material objects, and discursive practices come together to form dynamic associations that bind together, to perform actions—in this study, to reform education. The strength of putting assemblage to work methodologically lies in its insistence on following the ongoing processes “made up of uncertain, fragile, controversial, and ever-shifting ties” (Latour, 2005, p. 28) rather than attempting to fit the actors and their activities into bounded categories, geographical sites, or groups of analysis. We trace the interactions between individuals and organizations, and policy that at first seem tangential, or only loosely related, to local education reform in Wayside.

Analytically, we use assemblage thinking to consider the material and the discursive entities involved in reform. We situate reform as a product of, and constituted by, sets of discursive practices, activities, and textual/material products. We consider the discourses as “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak” (Foucault, 1997, in Ball, 1990, p. 17). Following Pickering (1998), we acknowledge the role in policy and reform for nonhuman or material actors. We concern ourselves with how these things “in texts...are continually coming into being, fading away, moving around, changing places with one another, and so on” (Pickering, p. 563). We demonstrate how objects with subjective investments, such as emails and blogs, mediate reform practices and “shape intentions, meanings, relationships, [and] routines” (Fenwick & Edwards, 2010, p. 6) in ways that are of consequence to the officials, reformers, activists, and public in our study.

We document the processes through which different reform actors come together, influence and change one another, and create linkages that eventually form a network of action and material, a process Latour refers to as “translation.” We see “how entities relate to each other” (Gorur, 2013, p. 216) and how their interactions shape, divert, and exert force on the reform. Here, we trace the linkages in what we refer to as one emerging education reform network, which is often uncertain, temporary, controversial, and repeatedly, if not continuously, performed and constructed. We play particular attention to the discourse of transparency and what it does, and does not, accomplish in the network.

Research Curiosities and Methods

The case study from which this paper emerged began in July 2011. Putting assemblage to work, as noted by Hamilton (2010), “is especially sympathetic to what Marcus (1995) calls a “multi-sited ethnography” that links data across different geographical spaces and times rather than focusing on a bounded local context (p. 4). Our case study began in Wayside, NY, a city that at the beginning of our study was characterized by a steadily decreasing native population, a declining body of highly-educated and skilled residents, and a shrinking economy. More recently, however, Wayside has enjoyed an upswing in housing prices, a resurgence in entrepreneurship, and a revitalization of the downtown. Gentrification has also renewed persistent concerns about racial and class segregation in the city’s neighborhoods and public schools.

To initiate a study of assemblage, one either begins by following the human actors, via interviews and observations, or first discursively analyzes material objects, such as texts, reports, and databases, serving as intermediaries that pass between actors and then following those material objects that become, with human investment, actors. The first author of this paper began by examining the material objects, namely policy documents and briefs associated with the federal

programs, Investing in Innovation Fund (i3) and Race to the Top (RTTT), as well as a two neighborhood revitalization planning grants that had substantial education components. The second author began by attending meetings organized by Wayside Ed Reform, Wayside Parent Coalition, and Wayside Teachers for Change, and then interviewing their staff, volunteers, and others we met at the meetings or who were referenced by those interviewed.

- Wayside Ed Reform. Founded in 2009 Wayside Ed Reform is a non-profit education reform advocacy organization aimed at responding to what its director calls “the urgent and critical challenges in our public education system.” Wayside Ed Reform provides the public with information on education policy and practices in Wayside. It seeks community-driven solutions. Through research, “grassroots organizing,” and advocacy, it aims to engage parents, community members, and city leaders to take action on education issues. According to its website, it supports “progressive education reform initiatives” aimed at all students at the state and local levels. It demands “transparency and accountability from our local education system.”
- Wayside Parent Coalition. This organization, which was created by the Wayside School District in response to persistent complaints about racism and classism in Wayside’s schools is the parent voice of the District. Its primary mission, according to its leader, a self-described “political activist and parent,” is to hold the district accountable for putting children and families first to ensure high academic achievement for all. The Coalition builds bridges between parents and the District, and closely monitors the implementation of parent involvement strategies. It is best known for its petitions against the District’s discipline policy and for its walkouts against testing.
- Wayside Teachers for Change. This non-profit organization was founded in 2010 and is not associated with the NY State Teachers Union. Wayside Teachers for Change is devoted to presenting teachers’ perspectives. According to its Facebook page, it is a community of dedicated individuals who both inform the public about education reform and also mobilize to challenge policy and practices in the Wayside School District. Among its most successful work are its sponsorship of debates between Wayside School Board candidates during election cycles. The founder serves on the advisory board of Wayside Ed Reform.

Despite identifying these three organizations early in our study, research utilizing ANT “is likely to have to be multi-sited, tracing the relations and flows of knowledge between government bureaucracies and activists, and between multinational companies, consultants and local populations” (Barry, 2006, p. 244). Thus, our study extended well beyond these three entities to include others enrolled in the dynamic network. Participants’ connections shifted and elided traditional long-term partnerships, as new relationships were formed and novel alliances were made in reaction to politics and economics. We did not find a linear progression of actions through sites of official policymaking and implementation (e.g. state, region, district, school), which are more common to policy trajectory studies (Lingard & Garrick, 1997; Maguire & Ball, 1994). Putting assemblage to work in this study allowed us to examine the “diachronic, [which is] constitutively indexed in time” (Pickering, 1998, p. 85) across multiple linkages, groups, and agencies.

By early August 2011, we had begun to literally map out the relationships between the documents, discourses, and multiple organizations, including the three Wayside reform groups described. By May 2013, when our research concluded, we had gathered the following data: forty-five initial and fourteen follow-up interviews. (education reformers—including parents, community activists, teachers, local advocacy coalitions, elected city, state, and national officials, leaders of state and national reform groups) and 500 documents relating to NCLB, RTTT, and regional reform materials (see table 1). We also spent 75 hours reviewing online platforms (tweets, blogs, websites, speeches, press releases) and had amassed 100 pages of observational notes (meetings, press conferences, and rallies).

Table 1
Summary of interviews and observations

Affiliation/Identification	Participants interviewed once	Participants interviewed more than once	Observations at meetings, events, summits, etc.
Local (WNY)	38	10	70
State (NY)	5	3	25
National	2	1	0

Note: Many of the participants were associated with groups that cross local, state, and national levels. In this table, we associate the source of data with the affiliation through which the participant most identified at the time of the data collection.

Data was initially coded and grossly analyzed in NVivo 8.0. Secondary coding included a focus on the codes, such as accountability and transparency, which appeared with the highest frequencies. Finally, a finer disaggregation of codes and analysis associated with transparency was performed.

Findings: Accountability, Transparency, and Evidence in Education Reform

Here, we introduce and analyze the education reform network in WNY, explore the relationship between accountability, transparency, and evidence, and draw attention to the ways in which transparency becomes embedded and performed in the reform network. As a notion, as a discourse, and also as a political tool, transparency appears to achieve support from those in and outside of schools associated with education reform and education policy. In our study the discursive construction of transparency was positioned not only as a means through which to account for education practices and policy, but also as a performance of accountability. As various actors put it to use, and acted upon it, transparency became less agreed upon, and its value was precarious in certain situations. Transparency, thus, became not a “matter of fact,” which according to Latour (2005) would have been produced “out there,” where it could have been understood as neutral and safe. Instead we demonstrate how transparency in our work can be better understood as a “matter of concern,” that propelled action, invited controversy, and drew attention to the ways that it was produced, performed, and evaluated.

Reform, Accountability, and Advocacy

Based on the interviews conducted in our study, there appeared to be wide-acceptance and praise for the initial work done by NCLB, and, in particular, its attention to data, accountability, and transparency. Even local reform groups, including Wayside Ed Reform, who on their websites, and in their marketing materials, claimed to be “progressive” or “liberally-directed,” aligned their demand for more accountability and transparency with the Republican Party (<https://cdn.gop.com/docs/2012GOPPlatform.pdf>). As explained by a member of Wayside Teachers for Change, and a teacher at a Wayside charter school, who identifies as “definitely third-party with Libertarian leanings”:

We need tests. I know. I know. That’s controversial to say...We [teachers] aren’t against accountability. I’m not. I use all kinds of assessments in my classes...No Child [NCLB] has gotten us some good data, and I use it to change lessons, add lessons, but I do that anyway...Teachers do that without big brother’s oversight and hand slapping...We’ve always been accountable and, the new [proposed] teacher evaluations pretty much show that. Our stuff is public these days. I say: “Go ahead and look at what I do.” What about the district? Let’s see them be accountable, the district...If we’re going to be held accountable and our kids’ test scores are linked to our evaluations, then let’s be transparent about everything in the District, not just convenient dirt on teachers and schools shared to shame us into submission (Interview, October 27, 2011).

Just as the NY teachers’ union was protesting against the focus on testing and accountability, many individual teachers, like this one, were speaking in more nuanced ways about accountability—and transparency. They argued against utilizing transparency as a politicized response to events and incidences (i.e., pointing to teachers “ineffectiveness” by publically releasing test score data for each teachers’ classes), but instead were in favor of a more open display of all education processes for public scrutiny.

A Wayside School Board member in our study argued that if it wasn’t for NCLB “and its mandate for data, data, and more data,” we still wouldn’t know what was going on in schools “even though we are, in theory, responsible for decisions there” (Fieldnotes, March 18, 2012). A staff member of Wayside Ed Reform equated the availability of school data to a complete understanding of the school system. “If it wasn’t for the data reporting requirements of NCLB,” he said, “we wouldn’t understand what a failing school means. If we didn’t have transparent data we really wouldn’t know the state of our schools and this helps us see where the dysfunction is and helps people better gauge why we need change” (Interview, February, 12, 2011). Many of those interviewed made some version of this argument: NCLB demands data and accountability, and with these two things, there was transparency, providing many—including those who have responsibilities in the formal education system and those who find themselves part of education reform outside schools—a much needed view of schooling. Often, school and district officials used accountability and transparency interchangeably when speaking to us, and to the public.

Of note, several reformers in the study stated that the school board members remained, even after having access to the data, in the dark about schooling and education reform. A volunteer at a Wayside Ed Reform complained:

It doesn't matter how much information they [the school board members] have. They're out of touch with what's going on in the local [ed reform] movement, and even so not with it when it comes to what's going on in schools...It's so ironic when you see them demanding more and more information and greater transparency from the superintendent and the schools and the principals and stuff, and then they are the most closed secret society in town. Totally corrupt. (Interview, November 30, 2012).

The volunteer was specifically angry that a charter school had recently hired a management firm to oversee its budget, and that the Wayside School Board had signed off on the agreement, while knowing that one of the district's board members was on the advisory board of the management firm. His concern proved valid; two years after this interview, an independent auditor concluded that neither the school nor the Wayside School Board noticed that the management firm was turning a large percentage of public funds into private gain, nor did they take action against the board member with the conflict of interest. After receiving the auditor's report, the State Education Department, not surprisingly, called for "more transparency" to be brought to financial agreements made between school boards and charter-management firms.

In Wayside, there had been a decade long division, if not active feud, between the school board and the teachers union, each claiming that the other was not being transparent in their practices. A parent active in Wayside Parent Coalition confirmed the discord and said that "in general, school boards just lack any transparency," making them very difficult for parents and education reformers to trust. "That's why we have all these parent and reform groups, to work against this gatekeeping of information," she said (Personal communication, September 1, 2011). The leader of Wayside Parent Coalition suggested that the reform groups were not invested in taking sides between the Board and the teachers, but rather just wanted to get beyond "all of the damn politics that keep these stupid arguments going year after year and just get the info to the people." He stated: "You need an education reform group [in the community]. They bring almost an intellectual capital to the situation...They get money from the right and the left for common, everyone's concerns (interview, January 30, 2012). Wayside Ed Reform received donations from organizations as seemingly disparate as the National Tea Party, the NY Democratic Party, and a WNY Chapter of the Libertarian Party of NY, and positioned itself as a mediator between policies/data and the wider community. They published extensive policy briefs with streams of national, state, and local data, created parent checklists and portals, cultivated politically minded community members, and maintained extensive Facebook and Twitter accounts blasting "edunews" to upwards of 5,000 followers.

Wayside Ed Reform interspersed their briefs, portals, and "edunews," with notions of transparency. Appearing to be "in the know" and "publically sharing" was crucial for the cultivation of reform networks and their self-legitimization. As a volunteer at Wayside Ed Reform explained:

Much of what [we] blast out is already out there on other websites, links deep in government stuff, but we make it way, so much, more easy to find...You can't really place a value on putting things all in one or two places so that parents know where to find it...They trust us for that...and we make sure to remind them that we are doing this for them, not for us...Joe Public sees us as experts because we serve them what he could probably get himself, but doesn't have the time or skills to get (personal communication, January 5, 2012).

The Cofounder and Director of Wayside Ed Reform concurred, and stated: “The community relies on us for picking up the policy side, they rely on us for an update, to translate what a law means” (Interview, November, 20, 2012). The reporting of data emerged as an important function of these groups; and it was this data, and the trust that parents and communities leaders held in the exposure of this data, that helped the community at large become active reformers. One such parent, who had just returned from a Wayside Parent Coalition sponsored rally in the state capital said, “they [reform groups] have a kind of consistency—they are at every board meeting, they constantly keep up with the data. The reality is that parents don’t have that luxury. You’re still a parent—you still gotta go to work and church” (Interview, January, 30th 2012). In fact, as McGuinn (2012) argues, the commitment to data, accountability, and choice by state governments helped spawn the massive growth in education advocacy movements.

Reform, Policy, and Discourse

In WNY, certain reform narratives gained value from repeated acceptance and use. As the founder of Wayside Teachers for Change explicitly told the second author, echoing what others had said: “People using the same language all over the state, the ideas gain some traction and credibility.” While social justice and equity were often named as underlying logics in reformer discourse, these logics become framed and re-positioned as technical manifestations of transparency aimed at data and accountability. This reflected the official narratives surrounding policy such as NCLB, which were often portrayed as improving education achievement of students of color and for closing the achievement gap between these and White students. However, as laid out by Hursh (2007), there is evidence that NCLB and similar neoliberal-informed reforms that center on standardized, high-stakes tests and increased accountability do less to improve the education experiences of students of color and poor students than “to portray public schools as failing [in order] to push for privatizing education provided competitive markets” (p. 501). Koyama and Cofield (2013) concur. Their study of NCLB revealed that New York City’s elected education officials, politicians, and school administrators often justify accountability in terms of global competitiveness “while minimizing the ways in which racial disparities continue even a decade after the implementation of NCLB mandates” (p. 273). Instead, they found that racial achievement patterns were disguised and obscured with test-driven accountabilities touted as helping all students.

While study participants in this study claimed that their work was in the words of one member of the Parent Coalition, “based solely in social justice and progressive aims for society” (Interview, April 22, 2011), discussions of economic inequality and race as factors in education equity were absent in all but three interviews. When issues of poverty were raised during interviews by the authors, they were often dismissed as unimportant or “nothing new.” As a principal of one of Wayside’s Title I schools casually mentioned, “We’ve had poverty forever, and I mean, we have tried for years to deal with it and nothing has changed, it may be worse. We need to focus our attention on teacher effectiveness, holding unions accountable and making sure every kid has a good school to choose from” (Personal communication, January 21, 2012). Standardized testing—and a sharing of the test score reports and cross-school comparisons publicly—became the means by which the quality of schools, teachers, and students were measured. And this was, perversely seen as “fair,” as it was applied to all and made transparent. We found no indication that most of reform organizations/actors in our study were centered on equity for poor students or students of color, even though Wayside neighborhoods were racially segregated, with the main North-South street dividing African American and White residents, and the city was one of the poorest in the country. The initiatives set forth by the reformers, and the information provided in the hard copy and online

materials did not explicitly focus on the racial achievement gap in Wayside. Only the Wayside Parent Coalition actively sought to reduce the disproportionate number of black students who were placed in special education or who received out of school detention.

Apparent consensus was, however, developed around the importance of transparency, making it nearly commonsense in this example. Yet, consensus, as we will see in a later example from this study, can also be a mask for hiding power, contestation, and relations of domination and exclusion. Strahern (2000) calls this “transparency of operation,” a process which rests on the assumption that if organizations are open, critique and improvement are possible, “transparency made visible” (p. 313). The gaze of transparency yields a static narrative of information, one fundamentally grounded in discrete, timeless packets of information, shifting the narrative from contextually bound domains and potentially rich embedded understandings of practitioners to narratives of performance and scalability.

In this study, support for transparency appeared as apolitical and pragmatic policy fragments which framed lobbying campaigns; crisscrossed the state in various policy contexts; and found their way into mayoral platforms, crossing party affiliations and bisecting communities of color in a growing an interconnected networks of politics, advocacy, and reform. They traversed space and locality, erasing the contestation, differences, and context-rich temporality of their original iterations. Traveling across the emerging reform network, these discursive fragments, despite narratives of localism and flexibility in policy initiatives, became relatively fixed, static and ready to be “scaled-up.” The desire for local knowledge, actors and data played against translating these “transparencies” into ideas that could migrate and work across larger de-contextualized spatial arrangements.

For example, NY Governor Cuomo, amidst of a budget deficit, declared the state “open for business.” He pushed for legislation designed to drive economic growth, to target areas for increased managerial efficiencies, to establish performance-based grants, and to increase performance outputs from an education system that “was first in the nation in per pupil spending and 34th in results” (Cuomo, 2011). The Governor repeated this fragment no less than 35 times in the six months after his State of the State address, in public policy speeches, on state government websites, embedded in media releases, and to gatherings of professional educators. It was used repeatedly as justification for the Governor appointed New York State Education Reform Commission and was also strategically used by reformers, carefully placed next to extensive pages of data and performance measurements of NYS students, in lobbying efforts, in speeches made at policy forums, in op-eds that appeared in various newspapers, and in the interviews conducted for this study.

Despite the complex political, social and economic arguments over school funding in NY, these discursive fragments became translated into politicians’ decontextualized platform bullet points and reformers’ rallying calls for change. These fragments were most certainly performative—they were able to “label heroes and villains, create space for action, exclude alternatives, legitimate new voices, attribute cause and effect...” (Ball, 2008). They helped to re-position and re-configure traditional political and ideological affiliations, allowing groups once rarely aligned to find common talking points and strategic alliances. National groups, such as the Conservative Americans for Prosperity and Friedman Foundation, were linked to local parent organizations, state education officials, progressive community activists and Democrat-based reform groups through money, grants, board memberships, social affiliations, political struggles and activism. The belief in coalitions formed to “empower community ownership over schools and build broad coalitions of student activists” (Interview, Wayside Ed Reform member, July 2, 2012), was enacted in Wayside. The reform network was highly active, constantly evolving, and deeply engaged in community activism. Alliances were formed on the belief, “that the cloudy mess of educational bureaucracy can be made sensible with common sense and transparency in educational reform” (Interview,

volunteer, Wayside Ed Reform, November, 28, 2011). Yet, transparency was, and is, still not the one size fits all solution to the myriad of schooling issues in Wayside chronicled in a State Education Department report covering the years of our study. In addition to the cessation of funding for the Education Reform and Budget Act and the massive cuts to public school funding in 2010, other issues cited included: chronic student and teacher absenteeism, inadequate curricular material, rampant student expulsions, widespread teacher ineffectiveness, and a high percentage of persistent low-achievement across district schools. Transparency, through discourse, became a convenient way to define the problems in education as those that needed only illumination to solve.

Reform, Actors, and Uncertainty

One woman, who led an advocacy group in a WNY city near Wayside that supports school choice, and that works with Black civil rights leaders in Wayside and other NY cities, is a good example of a local education reformer in our study. She was tasked with constructing an education platform for a mayoral candidate in her city. The resulting platform was a collection of reformer narratives, federal and state policy initiatives and policy fragments of networked reformer language. It included detailed plans for data management and an office of education innovation that would create and manage “new informational tools” to empower parents’ choices and make public bureaucracies more open. In all of her roles, she repeatedly called for increased transparency and the responsibility school districts had to parents. Testifying at the New York State Senate Education Committee Hearing in Wayside on October 16, 2013, one of the things she called for was for mandates increasing transparency. In that testimony, she argued that “[t]he public needs the full story if we are to engage in these discussions [about collective bargaining] in a meaningful and productive way.” In the same testimony, she also argued that policy makers needed to be more responsive and responsible to schools and not allow teachers’ unions to co-opt parent organizations. She was appointed in 2011 to serve on Governor Cuomo’s Education Reform Commission. According to Commission documents, she was “the only parent representative on the Commission ... [and] she has been a vocal proponent of greater transparency and parental involvement in education policy discussions.” She was a champion for transparency, where transparency was necessary, inevitable, and immutable.

However, notions of transparency, were in fact, quite uncertain. The following post published in the summer of 2012 on the blog of a teacher based in another WNY city brought this uncertainty to the fore:

Calling for transparency may do more harm than good. We must not forget the evils of government intervention and surveillance. Do we really want the government watching every move made in schools, in homeschooling? Should we continue to place transparency as an undisputed public good, we will contribute to our own peril. Those of us working for school reform will be watched and then called to account for our behaviors deemed oppositional to the public school system...

In response to the post, a teacher at a Wayside charter school wrote:

Are you kidding? You are making those of use {sic} who are true reformers working for change seem like paranoid idiots... Transparency is important and if we aren't transparent in our practices we aren't going to get the respect we deserve from those

working in “real” education....Groups like yours need to turn the lens on yourself in a “transparent” move...

Another person, a parent of a child attending a school in an upstate NY school outside of WNY, responded:

How can you want schools and government to be more transparent with their budgets [reference to the group’s earlier blog post about budgetary transparency] and then shout “Big brother, big brother”? Shame on you.

Others who responded on the site posted similar opposition to the initial concern over transparency as surveillance. However, there were also those who supported the group’s perspective.

Both the intent and the content of the blog post were challenged. The contextual and empirical complexities of transparency continued to defy the attempt by the group’s blog to make them amenable to simple forms of evaluation and action. Instead, the posts can be understood as “contested and precarious multiplicities” that aim to order opinions, identities, and practices (Fenwick, 2010, p. 119). The blog, and other forms of social media, created an electronic record that was at once a discourse and a material object. Specifically, the controversy that arose in the blog was part of a technical zone of “conflict and negotiation among actors that would otherwise happily ignore each other” (Venturini, 2010, p. 261), but who now found themselves linked in a larger network.

Links and discourses in networks, and even networks themselves, though, can be temporal. After five days from the initial posting, 41 responses were still visible on the site, but several, including the one by the Wayside charter schoolteacher had been removed. Two weeks later, the entire blog strand was removed, which illuminates another important dimension of transparency—the time frame in which information is made available to an audience. Once the original display of information was no longer available, the material was shared through second-hand accounts. The description of the blog thread was developed as part of the information which was re-distributed by those who had responded, those who read the responses, those who heard about the responses, and so on. The quality or accuracy of what was shared, and attributed to the blog, was uncertain; several parents and teachers who were interviewed after the blog thread was removed referred to it with misattributions and misleading interpretations for their own purposes without accountability to the initial blog ideas.

Reform, Expertise, and Contradictions

There exists a contradiction in education policy: the assumption that everyone knows what education policy is, what and who it should organize, and which practices it is intended to change when in fact, there is frequently little consensus or clarity about the aims and of such policy (Ball, 2000). The same can be said of education reform. Devices of transparency utilized in education reform provide an even greater (false) assurance that knowing, and what we know, can be evidence that reform is working. They can also be used, as they were in this study, to establish the authority of particular reformers.

For example, each year, the NY Department of Education issues report cards (with A-F grades) for public schools and districts within the state. These describe student performance on the state tests in English Language Arts, Mathematics, and Science, and measure each school’s yearly progress, identifying schools in need of improvement. Based on these reports Wayside schools are

comparatively ranked with schools found to be similar (“peer schools”). According to a Wayside School District administrator, sound methods and measures had been applied to rank schools’ academic rankings in 2011-2012 across the district “since they were all shared out to the principals, the teachers, the kids, and their parents in the same way, they [the rankings] couldn’t be argued about” (Personal communication, April 23, 2013). Making the information public also made it valid and reliable, according to the administrator. Of course, several principals whose schools received low rankings contested the rankings. The district and school board aimed to squelch the challenges to the rankings by offering additional comparative data, again to “everyone,” via the district’s website. Transparency, they assumed, would end the controversy. Yet, every bid to isolate, order, measure, tabulate and establish certainty with transparency was challenged, not only by those associated with the schools, but also by reform organizations, parent groups, and politicians. Making the rankings, and the data said to undergird them, public, did not make them unarguable.

In a more startling example, excerpts and summarized content from an email, written by a school district official in a city located in central NY entered the WNY education reform network. It circulated across listservs subscribed to by education reformers, teachers, and parents across WNY, and became public in one businessperson’s statewide political campaign. Shared excerpts posted by Wayside Parents Coalition read:

As you know, the state has just released the school report cards. As expected we’ve improved, but still have a ways to go... [information about particular schools report cards]...I anticipate we’ll be getting heat from parents, politicians, media, all the usual suspects...I’m asking you to talk, if contacted about the grade, about our efforts to become more open and to make our data more available to parents and the public. We can even talk about how we’ve made it possible for parents to access their kids’ grades and assignments 24/7 with our parent portal.... Whatever you do, talk about progress in being more transparent and accessible.... (Original email, dated April 7, 2012)

The leader of the Coalition added that this email demonstrated why he does not trust school district administrators: “Exactly why we know they aren’t totally being transparent with us...they say they are, but see here [referring to the email], they aren’t” (Personal communication, May 4, 2012). He added that “until they come straight with us—be transparent, we’ll agitate and instigate for change” not only in Wayside, but beyond.

Once the email was “leaked” by the Coalition,” according to a Wayside school principal, controversy “exploded” across the reform network, including Wayside Ed Reform, in which this principal held membership (Personal communication, June 1, 2012). She recounted her initial response:

I was in my office and a teacher, she’s also a part of our [ed reform] group, stormed into my office and she’s not a stormer. She threw the email on my desk and asked if I got it? No, I hadn’t even seen it....She’d gotten it from a listserv and I knew there’d be trouble over this one (Interview, April 8, 2012).

The principal’s prediction of “trouble” was accurate as word of the email, and the email itself, spread.

A member of Wayside Teachers for Change —a group that “works to improve public schools by advocating for an informed teacher voice in determining what is best for children”

(group's Facebook page) –shared what he called “the outrage” shared by teachers who had read the email:

I'm not surprised. Teachers I know aren't surprised. They're outraged! Really, this is how it all works? This is how we public educators look to everyone . . . We don't talk about what kids are learning and the cool stuff they're doing in schools? We don't even talk about how we've made academic progress and developing kids as good human beings. But, we talk about how we made, bought this, portal so parents can see grades. . . I'm so angry I don't even know why I'm calling them 'we.' That's not parent engagement or shared-governance or anything like what a democratic, socially just education looks like . . . (Email, April 11, 2012).

When asked about sharing the email with the public, the teacher who managed the Wayside Teachers for Change Facebook site said he didn't think that would help matters. It would only, in his opinion, draw more attention to the incompetence of the district administrators.

Other groups across WNY, however, aimed to use the email, as a way to gain support from the public. They made excerpts available through their listservs and referenced the email's main points at meetings. A member of a parent group in a city near to Wayside said that it would be a “good rallying point” for parents who saw the portal as a panacea to the “real and legitimate concerns of parents” and a volunteer at a state reform organization, said that the email was representative of the way that “all WNY governing bodies operate, claiming that transparency is reform” (Fieldnotes, July 25, 2012). Touting transparency as an important reform strategy by the district administrator came to be challenged, but the challenges themselves tended to get organized around the issues configured by transparency, thus reinforcing, if not objectifying, it. Notions of transparency, while not shared by all study participants temporarily brushed aside the particular, the local and the contextual, and operate on a universalizing rationale. Yet, the leaking of the email draws our attention, also, to how selective transparency can be in sharing and hiding information. Paradoxically, the email, while not intended for public consumption, pushed transparency in its message as a proactive solution to a school's low ranking.

Concluding Thoughts

Reforms resituate or reposition actors. As seen in this article, parents can become policy actors, and politicians and business people can position themselves as education reformers. In their efforts to hold schools and those charged with governing schools accountable, they utilized, created, and manipulated tools of transparency, such as parent portals, websites, and blogs, to claim their rights in education reform. In fact, they emerged as part of the reform as they spun their own stories of transparency. As we demonstrate, notions of transparency in the reform assemblage privileged linear and undifferentiated conceptions of space, structure and causality, erasing any concept of the multiple temporalities and contexts that exist in particularized social domains. As bits of transparency discourse spread across the network, they gained purchase as local, national and global particulars were collapsed. Building alliances, often with the repetition of shared messages about transparency, became critical. As one Wayside Ed Reform employee said, “I don't care what the policy is—vouchers, merit pay, charters, corporate tax credits—if it works, we'll find partners to collaborate from the business and political sector and we'll back it” (Interview, July 2, 2012). So, under a broad umbrella of being transparent, and utilizing transparency to gain support and allies, disparate groups and individuals can join efforts.

However, evoking transparency in education reform does not make everyone equally nor adequately informed. In fact, within Wayside's education reform network the discourse of transparency was selectively mobilized as "entities negotiate[d] the connections when they come together, using persuasion, force, mechanical logic, seduction, resistance, pretense, and subterfuge, etc." (Fenwick & Edwards, 2010, p. 10). Transparency was effective in illuminating that which individuals, groups, organizations, agencies wanted to forefront in their branding, their marketing, and in their support gathers. Yet, illuminating or drawing repeated attention to select things, such as school data of funding inequities, also obscured, or kept in the background, other issues, such as persistent differences in academic achievement by race. Even more worrisome, transparency was often substituted for accountability. If an organization presented itself as transparent, even while hiding its ties to national political groups, such as the Tea Party, it claimed also its accountability to the local public. Discourses of transparency in education reform should not be considered the solution to education issues. Yet, transparency, in and of itself, is not necessarily bad. It is the discursive practices through which it gains certainty, stability, and legitimacy as the solution to issues of schooling that must be interrogated if we are to experience education reform.

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About the Authors

Jill Koyama

Associate Professor, Educational Policy Studies and Practice, University of Arizona

jkoyama@email.arizona.edu

<http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0990-4930>

Much of Jill Koyama's work centers on the networked politics and policy of education, especially as they are accessed, challenged, and reshaped by those not assigned official policymaking status or power. Her research is situated across three integrated strands of inquiry: the productive assemblage of education policy; the controversies of globalizing education policy; and the politics of language policy and immigrant and refugee education.

Brian Kania

Doctoral student, Educational Culture, Policy, and Society, SUNY at Buffalo

bskania@buffalo.edu

Brian Kania's current research traces the linkages between contemporary education reform movements, technocratic policy initiatives and changes in the modality and function of the state. He is particularly interested in economic inequality and the intersections of social class, economic development and educational policies.

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